

Cosatu pleads for safety on trains

*Government's transport policy calls for strategies to meet the needs of different groups of users. Cosatu's Western Cape region resorted to strike action to place pressure on Metro Rail to provide proper services to commuters. This issue, which is now being debated in Nedlac, has the potential of forcing government to either change or adhere to its stated policies. Cosatu's regional secretary **Tony Ehrenreich** explains how the campaign has unfolded.*

A crisis on Metro Rail in the Western Cape, which saw at least one worker a day injured, killed or maimed, coupled with poor service, forced Cosatu to take action. The federation eventually went out on strike on 13 July 2002 following months of discussions with the company. The action was pre-empted by the realisation that there was a lack of will on the side of Metro Rail, the South African Rail Commuter Corporation and government to change the conditions under which commuters were forced to travel over the last few years. The strike was intended to force Metro Rail to:

- ensure an adequate number of trains;
- improve safety and security on trains;
- provide one free train for the elderly and the unemployed per week;
- provide an insurance system in the event of accidents and prioritised expenditure.

When did the dispute arise?

In November 2001 Metro Rail cut an already overcrowded service in the Western Cape by 84 trains. Cosatu

responded to this and initiated negotiations in an attempt to get the trains reinstated. This was achieved following strike threats. During this process, Cosatu members raised a range of problems they were experiencing with Metro Rail. In an attempt to resolve the ongoing train crisis the matter was referred to Nedlac. The participants in these negotiations included Metro Rail, South African Rail Commuter Corporation, the Department of Labour and provincial, local and national government. During these negotiations it became clear that there was no urgency on the side of these parties to deal with the problems, which include the following:

Adequate number of trains to prevent overcrowding

By the company's own admission, the number of trains required to service the demand of commuters was higher than is currently in place. Metro Rail should be conducting a new census to determine service needs coupled with a budget, which should be forwarded to the NCCR and Transnet nationally. A



Unicity survey has found that the majority of lines run at over 100% of capacity during peak times. Cosatu has proposed that the present commuters be spread over a greater time period in the morning to reduce the levels of overcrowding. One of the ways this can be achieved is by getting schools to start one hour later, and for learners to travel one hour later. The details of this spread can be calculated.

Safety and security on trains

Travelling by train has become hazardous both in terms of accidents

and crime. Accidents could be avoided if all doors are closed prior to a train leaving the station. This would, in some small way, start to ensure that accidents are reduced. This can be implemented immediately, but Metro Rail has all kinds of excuses. In terms of crime, there should be security personnel at every train station. Secondly, there should be dedicated rail police that are part of existing police services. Thirdly, there should be a dedicated alarm system in each carriage (Cosatu has done research in this area and has found that a company can quite easily provide this capacity at a cost of R700 per carriage). Many companies would be willing to sponsor these alarm systems. Finally, access in and out of the train system should be controlled at every station to stop thugs getting on.

One free train for the elderly and unemployed

Corporate sponsorship could be used to ensure this goal is achieved.

Planning a new train line

Cosatu has called for the building of a new rail line, which has the potential of improving commuter services and creating greater efficiencies in the system. The proposal will bring about a better spread in the usage levels of the different lines and get commuter traffic flowing more evenly in different directions across the Metropolitan areas. It would also cut out unnecessary linkages and reduce travel time. This would provide an opportunity for the rail network to run in a complete ring around the Metropolitan area. The proposal is to build a rail line from Muizenberg to the Strand. The Kaptein's Klip and Khayelitsha line would join up with this crosscutting line. In addition to these four stations on this line, there would be a number of other stations, which would contribute to the promotion of tourism along the coast. The new line would also enable

commuters to travel from Khayelitsha to the coastline and over to the Muizenberg line to Cape Town. Another potential line is from Cape Town to Atlantis. As a result of these negotiations we have received requests from commuters in Worcester for a service that would link them with Wellington.

Comfort on trains

It is totally unacceptable that trains are in such a state of disrepair. During winter the commuters get wet because many trains do not have windows.

Metro Rail insurance

Their insurance is completely inadequate and provides no support or adequate compensation for people who have been afflicted on the trains.

Criminal charges

Cosatu has taken the unprecedented step of bringing criminal charges against Metro Rail for culpable homicide. This action has been necessitated by the fact that nobody takes responsibility for those who are killed or die while travelling by train. There is clear evidence of disregard for commuters. This disregard borders on criminal negligence from the side of management and government and will only end if somebody is forced to take responsibility for it.

Funding

Metro Rail has wasted public monies to promote their image to the public instead of utilising the money to improve conditions for commuters. At huge expense, they recently published a full colour four-page insert in two Cape Town-based newspapers. This is a blatant waste of scarce resources. Government through a complicated system of subsidies funds Metro Rail. Presently government is clearly not making sufficient funds available to provide an adequate service. Government, at all levels, must provide

adequate funding to address the problems identified and to implement some of the proposals Cosatu has put forward. It is scandalous that government took back R30m in profit made by Metro Rail last year, the monies could have been used to address the inherent problems in the organisation.

Allocation of funding in the province

A brief evaluation of how money is spent in this province reveals that working families and their interests are not considered adequately. The Western Cape government spends millions in all areas to improve safety in the city centre or to build a concrete divide between the N2 and N1 freeways to make car commuters' journey safer. We support and applaud this. But the government cannot spend R500 000 to improve the transport safety of working families. This must be condemned.

Conclusion

Cosatu was left with little option but to embark on strike action to highlight what is happening to commuters in the Western Cape. This action, as much as anything, is directed at government and their failure and inability to provide effective public transport and to fund this.

Ahead of the strike, Cosatu even sent an open letter to the premier, Mr Van Schalkwyk, to contribute to a resolution. The premier left the province in crises with people dying everyday and a strike looming that would have an impact on the economy. Clearly we must conclude that this premier is as much of a political delinquent as his predecessors and we can only expect that there will be further instances where politics is put before the people. Cosatu can only express its dismay for the complete disregard of the premier for working families and their concerns.

LB

This document forms the basis of a report prepared for discussion in Nedlac.